



Peggy Trendell-Jensen's story of **Chris**



It's fortunate for our family that when the Rev. Alick Trendell of London, England, applied to work as an Anglican missionary, he was given a bulky beaverskin coat and sent to Alberta, Canada. For there he met Etta Wood – artist, schoolteacher, and one of this country's first female hockey players. Three days after they were introduced, Alick proposed; four years after that, in 1936, my mother was born in Wetaskiwin.

She was called Margaret Christine; Margaret means 'pearl', and, mostly, she lived up to her name. A 1942 clipping from the Edmonton Journal features a six-year-old Margaret on its "Beautiful Children" page, and my grandfather, by now rector of All Saints' Cathedral in Edmonton, wrote home to his mother to say that "Margaret in particular is the attraction of all who know her."

But Etta and Alick soon came to realize that Margaret had not just inherited their upright sensibilities, but a good dose of their pioneering derring-do. Despite her bows and ringlets, the neighbourhood boys knew their playmate as "Toughy Trendell," and flashes of temper were not unknown. She once hurled a carving knife across the kitchen at her older brother because he wouldn't help clean up the dishes left by the forty or fifty people who routinely visited the rectory after Sunday service. Her aim, fortunately, was as bad as her mood.

Margaret's exuberance was given full rein in the summertime, when Etta and her young children would decamp to a rustic cabin at Seba Beach. Etta gave each child a pocketful of nuts in the morning, sent them roaming, and told them not to return until suppertime. Given such freedom, Margaret developed a taste for adventure she would never relinquish. At fifteen, she fudged her age to get a job at Jasper Park Lodge, where she waitressed for the next four summers. Although the dining room rules were rigid ("serve food from the left, remove dishes from the right"), life at the lodge was exciting. Marilyn Monroe stayed there when she was filming *River of No Return* in 1953 ("She was like a cat in heat," Mom recalls, "and poor old Joe DiMaggio sat at another table watching her, looking miserable."). Another summer, Margaret had dozed off while suntanning on the grounds, and woke up to a crunching noise – the sound of a bear taking a bite from her heel. Luckily her scream scared him away.

In 1950, Margaret's family left Edmonton to take a position at a church in a wealthy Vancouver neighbourhood. When Margaret registered at Prince of Wales Secondary and was asked her name, she opened her mouth and unexpectedly heard herself reply "Chris," an abbreviation of her middle name. In this new city, "Margaret," it seemed, was no more; although her parents would call her that till the end of their days, to everyone else she became 'Chris.'

Mom lived in the rectory in Shaughnessy, surrounded by many classmates who would go on to become wellknown politicians and heirs to family companies. Being a poor church mouse amongst those to the manor born, it would have been easy to feel 'lesser than' – especially when the wardens of the parish gave her father a dressing-down because his Argyle socks, they claimed, were inappropriately loud for a clergyman. But the social strata didn't daunt Mom; ever friendly, she learned the power of accessories to brighten up an old dress, and let her prowess on the basketball court speak for itself. (And, for the record, her father went out and bought the brightest pair of socks he could find.)

After high school, Mom entered the VGH School of Nursing. In my grandmother's scrapbook is a photo of Mom as a student nurse, glowing in her starched apron, holding a candle at her installation ceremony. But underneath Etta had written "Harry was always waiting for her in a big car, and he won out." Nursing school was left behind in favour of marriage and motherhood. Harry was a scaler for the B.C. Forest Service, so was often away at logging camps while they raised a young son, John, and daughter, Sue, in an

apartment in North Vancouver, a rental home in Horseshoe Bay, and finally in their own house they built in the wilds of upper Lynn Valley in 1964. Peggy (that's me) was born two years later.

Despite happy times and accomplishments, Mom and Dad came from quite different childhood environments and married life wasn't always easy. It meant adjustments on both sides, and in fact they would separate, amicably, not long after I left home. I don't remember Mom being anything but upbeat, however; her personal credo was "Keep God in the centre" and it was the tiller with which she steered her life. Theological hair-splitting left her cold; everything worthwhile, she felt, boiled down to 'Love Your Neighbour'. In the 1970s, she led the way to the founding of a shelter for abused women and children in North Vancouver, long before the term 'domestic abuse' had been coined or the existence of it even widely acknowledged. She was the volunteer program director for Camp Artaban on Gambier Island, sometimes clocking over twenty meetings a month on top of other duties, and was infamous for the phone calls she made at 7 a.m., before her day as a school district literacy aide began. She always found it easier to get people to agree to volunteer assignments before they were fully awake.

We were all brought up with a sense of duty – we'd certainly never leave a church supper until every chair was stacked – but fun was never far away. While other harried mothers would Christmas shop with tired eyes and pursed lips, Mom would grab a hat and glasses from the store shelves and disappear into a photo booth to record a series of funny poses. She could always be counted on to come up with new larks; elaborate water fights at camp involving hundreds of screaming girls, all-night rollerskating marathons to raise money for Artaban, or the Always Look Twice Society, a group of friends who spent summers combing parking lots to see who could record the greatest number of license plates from different states and provinces.

After I left home in 1987, Mom's wanderlust came to the fore once again, and she embarked on her first trip abroad, spending nine weeks backpacking and hostelling on her own throughout the United Kingdom. Had she wanted company, it might have been a tough sell. Her style of travel wasn't for everyone; she never knew when she would be discovered in the hostel shower by a horrified youth, and she walked each day carrying a 46-pound pack. In subsequent trips, she winnowed it down to 16 pounds, living for two months with one pair of trousers, no toiletries, and a system that involved air-drying her rinsed-out underwear in a mesh pocket on her backpack.

As always, adventure followed wherever she led, cropping up in the most unexpected places. One leg of her journey was on England's newest passenger train, one much revered for its ability to be on time, every time. But upon visiting the onboard loo, she was greeted with an unflushed toilet. She pushed the button to flush it but nothing happened. She pushed again. Nothing. A moment later agitated noises arose from the corridor, and the door was flung open without warning by a mottle-cheeked, angry conductor. The train, meantime, had screeched to halt – Mom hadn't been pushing the toilet flusher at all, but the emergency stop. The conductor's shrieks about disrupted schedules were the only sound in a traincar of commuters who studiously avoided Mom's eye, pretending to be fixated by their morning papers. Needless to say, she fled the train at the next station, long before her actual destination. The engineer climbed out of his car to shake his fist in her wake.

It wouldn't be her last run-in with transport officials. When Mom retired from teaching in 2003, we sent her for a weekend in Toronto. As always, she was travelling light, with only her carry-on daypack for luggage. Unfortunately – and this became clear at the airport security check-in – it hadn't occurred to her to empty its pockets from her last wilderness outing. They pulled her out of the line when they found the nail scissors. They summoned the first police officer when they unearthed her hunting knife with its six-

inch blade. By the time they found her pepper spray at the bottom of the pack, she was surrounded by a ring of stony-faced officers and told not to speak. Needless to say, it didn't help matters that her ticket had been booked under her married name, while the driver's license in her wallet bore the maiden name she'd reclaimed after her separation. Somehow she made it to Toronto – minus her confiscated weaponry.

Perhaps she'd fare better on the highway, she thought when planning her next trip. She'd saved up to buy the new car she'd had her eye on – a maroon PT Cruiser. One of its features was a passenger seat that could lie flat like a bed. That's all the invitation Mom needed to embark on a solo roadtrip from Vancouver to Halifax, sleeping in fields and campgrounds along the way. As a bon voyage gift, I gave her a replacement hunting knife with 'Halifax 2004' inscribed on the blade, along with strict instructions to keep it away from airports.

An amazingly frugal traveller (her total food bill for the six-week roadtrip was \$144), Mom had always been creative in how she financed her trips. But we started to get concerned when she began to sell her body parts for medical research.

"It's only a small piece of hip bone," she insisted. "And the \$500 will pay for tires for my Colorado trip." We wondered if a 70-year-old woman with osteoporosis should be quite so cavalier with her infrastructure, but when injury did eventually strike, it wasn't a hip issue but a herniated disc. For one year she couldn't sit down except for a few painful moments at a time, and driving a car was out of the question. Her problem was finally rectified with surgery, and within a few months of that she was once again walking several kilometres at a stretch. But not long after – on the eve of the 2010 Olympics – Mom stepped awkwardly and snapped a small bone in her foot. It meant another year spent on crutches coaxing a stubborn metatarsal to re-knit itself.

Thank goodness, Mom is now up and running again, and as I write she is revisiting her favourite hostels in England, this time with my sister Sue (whose last text message reports our mother is living largely on chocolate and beer). It surely won't be the last of Mom's adventures; her own mother, Etta, lived to 101. Mom turned 75 this year and has many miles to go, and people to meet, before she rests. When she gets back from this trip, she'll return to working with a Palestinian family, one of the many refugee families with whom Mom has become involved through sponsorships arranged through the church. When I see her now with some of the former refugees she helped bring to Canada over the years – citizens now busy with jobs and schools and families – it moves me to see the tenderness in their eyes, and I realize how fortunate I have been to grow up under her influence.

She will be embarrassed when she reads this, and no doubt cross at my proud words. But I have to tell you all this now, you see, because when she dies (a journey she expects to be ever so interesting) Mom insists she doesn't want a eulogy. "Think of the lonesome souls who have no one to speak for them when they die," she says. "We're all equal."

She will die, then, as she always lived: with God in the centre – and adventure never far from her mind.